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AUTHOR Michel, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

This paper makes the following points concerning the teaching of Spanish reading to the Spanish dominant child: (1) Encourage parents to begin teaching their children to read as early as possible, (2) teach reading first in the mother tongue of the child, the language the child knows best, (3) isolate and solve the difficulties the child finds most troublesome, (4) vary the kinds of reading materials, (5) maintain a high level of interest, (6) choose challenging selections, and (7) encourage as much individual reading as possible. (Author/SK)

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BY:
Dr. Joseph Michel
Professor of Foreign Languages
and Literatures and Linguistics
and of Bilingual and Bicultural
Studies

The University of Texas
at San Antonio

TEACHING SPANISH READING TO THE SPANISH DOMINANT CHILD

After learning to express himself, nothing is more likely to have as great an influence on a child as either learning or not learning to read. Not only does reading convey content in the form of concepts and ideas to the child, it likewise becomes an indispensable instrument in a literate society, both for achieving in school and achieving in society. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that reading is one of the most basic subjects in the curriculum. It is therefore essential that the child learn to read as efficiently as possible.

WHAT IS READING?

Reading is the process by which meaning is extracted from a set of visual symbols. These symbols or characters are based on oral language. Not all oral languages have a written system. As a matter of fact, it has been estimated that of the some 3,500 languages, over 2/3 do not have a written form.

Reading means extracting meaning from written symbols; learning to read from the viewpoint of the learner is his ability to "break the code" and extract meaning from the graphemes.

Eleanor Thonis says:

> "The process of reading, though very complex, consists of two major actions. The first is the decoding of the written system, which is the act of making associations between the printed symbols and the oral ones; the second is the act of attaching meaning to the oral symbols as decoded. Reading in any language involves certain proficiencies and specific skills."[1]

The child then has to develop the ability to see the written symbols and to extract the meaning not only of individual words but of entire sentences.

Reading, according to how it is done, is of two kinds. The first is silent reading, when no overt verbalization takes place, and the second is oral reading when the words and sentences are pronounced aloud. Both kinds of reading are important to the child and both involve particular skills.

Though reading is based on written language, language and reading should not be confused. Thus, learning the meaning of a word is learning language, not learning to read. However, the meaning thus acquired is used in reading. Also, learning to pronounce a word correctly is language learning, though here again the correct pronunciation of a word can also be a part of reading. This distinction is not a distinction without a difference. As a matter of fact, it is very pertinent to teaching reading. The teacher who continually insists on the correct pronunciation of words or who continually interrupts to extract meaning is not teaching reading but rather language, and by so doing is interrupting the reading process which the student is striving to master.

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[1]Eleanor Wall Thonis, Teaching Reading to Non-English Speakers, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970, p. 3.

Since reading is based on the primacy of oral language, mastery of the reading process is required in as many codes as there are languages. Thus, one learns to read in Spanish, French, German, Russian, etc. That which changes is the code or the system of the language. That remaining the same is the basic visual and neurological process the reader goes through in extracting meaning. Some joint conventions on which reading is based change according to language. The eye movements are the same whether the child is reading German, French or Spanish. The proceeding from left to right and from top to bottom also remains the same in Western languages. This of course would not hold true in Arabic where the reader goes from right to left and top to bottom. In Chinese the conventions call for reading from top to bottom in columns but progressing from right to left.

LEARNING TO READ IN SPANISH

The language which one first learns is a very important factor in learning to read, more so than would at first appear. Richard Hodges in his book, Language and Learning to Read makes the following statement:

> "In addition to the evidence suggesting that reading acquisition may be different from and more difficult than oral language learning, there is also evidence to suggest that English orthography presents more problems in learning to read than does the orthography of other languages. In Europe, reading disability appears to be greatest among children with English as their native tongue. Second, among those speaking German, and least among native speakers of Romance Languages. Japanese children show less than one per cent occurrence of reading disability as opposed to approximately ten or more per cent in the United States."[2]

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[2]Richard E. Hodges and E. Hugh Rudorf (Editors), Language and Learning to Read, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972, p. 132.

This observation is borne out by the author's experience while teaching in Mexico. Children by the fifth grade read with complete fluency. That is, they are able to go through the process of reading without major difficulties. In many cases, they are able to read material of a content difficulty far beyond their intellectual development. Though they could go through the process, of course, they did not understand the meaning. This leads to the conclusion that the mechanics of learning to read are easier in Spanish than in English. This is so because what Thonis calls the "fit" of language, which is the correspondence between the sound system and the written system of the language, is much closer in Spanish than in English. Again, this is borne out by the fact that in Latin America as well as in Spain, spelling is not a subject in the curriculum. The child learns how to spell "naturally" and phonetically without endless hours of memorization and concentration. He can transcribe language from its oral form into its correct and acceptable written form. This, of course, does not mean that the Spanish speaking child does not have trouble with some graphemic distinctions. For example, the c, the z and the s are a source of endless difficulty. So are the distinctions between the b and the v, between the y and ll, and between the r and rr. These, however, are minor difficulties which a simple explanation or an insistance on the part of the teacher will help correct.

Hence, it is safe to say that given Spanish as a written language system it is easier for the child to learn to read in Spanish than it is to learn to read in English.

Moreover, since the child we are considering is Spanish dominant, teaching him to read in his mother tongue is easier than teaching him to read in English which he doesn't know as well and in which the written system is more complicated. The continued use of the dictionary for pronunciations and accentuation is necessary in English throughout life and even for academicians, while such is not the case in Spanish.

READING IN ENGLISH

Once the child has learned to read in Spanish, we ask ourselves what it is that he has achieved. He has mastered the process of reading, that is to say, he is able to extract meaning from the written system of Spanish symbols. He has developed the muscular and neurological skills required to do this. He has learned that in reading Spanish, you read from left to right, from top to bottom. He is able to recognize the symbols that are used to depict certain sounds or certain ideas. This is why Thonis is able to say: "He really does not have to learn to read a second time."[3] What then is the problem that faces the Spanish dominant child who has to learn to read in English? The answer lies partly in the explanation given above. The child can begin to learn to read English as soon as he has acquired a reasonable command of English. In some cases, this may happen in kindergarten, in others at the first grade level, and in others only at the second grade level. This will vary according to the individual language ability of the child and also according to the preparation he has

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[3]Thonis, Op. cit., P. 108.

received at home. Again, Thonis says: "It is not that they have to learn to read over again. It is rather that they now have to make new sound symbol associations to learn new structural patterns and to gather new meanings as needed when equivalents in meanings is not possible between the languages."[4]

As the child learns English, he will "realize" that the r in English is not the same as the r in Spanish and that the written equivalents are also different. He "learns" this, though of course he would not be able to formulate the appropriate linguistic rules.

The child must also realize, and probably does so quickly and without too much "teaching", that he may be reading in one system at a given moment and in another system at another. It is like being aware that he is speaking in Spanish or speaking in English. This is a subconscious awareness but an important one. This was brought to the mind of the author when driving down the street. A sign which said "beat osu" was read as if it were in the Spanish system and only when it was read in English was it possible to make any sense out of it. It read "Beat O.S.U." (Oklahoma State University).

Besides learning the inconsistencies of the English vowel system, the child must learn the value of the English consonents and consonent blends. The structural and semantic patterns will be different in English. The reader must become accustomed to their occurrence. He must likewise learn the print conventions of English, for example, that our 's indicates possession or a contraction. He will probably miss the inverted question

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[4]Thonis, Ibid, p. 108

mark and exclamation point at the beginning of a sentence to indicate what the intonation should be. Finally, he will have to learn that intonations in the two languages are different. Moreover there are few conventions in the written system of either language to transcribe intonation. That is why Hildreth says: "Build oral language ahead of and along with reading lessons if children are to learn to read well . . . Considerable attention has been given recently to listening as a neglected aspect of oral language comprehension. Listening with acute understanding carries over to reading with understanding."[5]

How much Spanish and how much English reading the child should be taught and how long this instruction should be continued formally will have to be resolved on the basis of the individual goals of each particular school having a bilingual education program. Suffice it to give the general principle: The greater the language ability the child has in reading in both Spanish and English the better off he will be. The more Spanish and English he knows the better off he will be.

METHODS FOR TEACHING TO READ

Reading is a process which is more learned than taught. The parent as well as the classroom teacher is faced with the problem of facilitating learning to read for the child, and to do it as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Hence, a discussion of methods for the teaching of reading is inescapable.

Spanish reading has been taught traditionally through phonics.[6] The child learns the letters, learns the syllables, learns words; then is

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[5]Gertrude Hildreth, "Linguistic Factors in Early Reading Instruction," The Reading Teacher, (December, 1964), Vol. 18, No. 3: p. 176.

[6]For a discussion of an investigation into reading methodology in Mexico and its results read Charles H. Hubert, Jr., "Initial Readings in Spanish for Bilinguals".

able to break the words into syllables and into letters; and finally he puts the whole together and learns to read phrases and sentences. The onomatopoeia method is really no more than a device for teaching the sounds of individual letters. The procedure which I have just described for the teaching of reading in Spanish has been considered successful in Mexico and Spain. It is how reading is currently taught there with a degree of success, that educators in all Spanish speaking countries have been satisfied with.

Such is not the case in English, which we have already seen. It presents many more problems in learning to read than Spanish. Here the controversy of methods has ranged and raged: from the phonetic method to the look-say method to the linguistic approaches; with linguists, reading specialists, psychologists, foreign language specialists and child language learning specialists all doing verbal battle. Hence, to suggest a particular method would be rash indeed. If I may be allowed, however, I would like to make the following suggestion. It is obvious that the problems of learning to read in English are quite different from those encountered by the student learning to read in Spanish. Hence, different methodologies and different and varied techniques are called for. The difficulties change from language to language, but also from child to child. Hence, the method or technique that would solve the one child's problem might not meet the needs of another. What I am suggesting is a clinical approach to begin with. The teacher should analyze the child's difficulty in Spanish if he is reading Spanish, determine its cause, and try to provide a solution. The same would be applicable in English. The teacher working with these children

would, of course, need to know both English and Spanish in order to be able to solve language-caused difficulties that the child meets when he is bilingual. After the clinical study of the difficulties, the answer to methodology lies in eclectic usage. This answer is not really a "cop-out" and can only be the result of years of experience in the teaching of reading both in English and Spanish. The doctor listens to symptoms, diagnoses, and finally applies a remedy. So too, the teacher of reading both in Spanish and English should examine the difficulty the child is having, analyze it and provide a remedy.

THE CHILD

The teacher teaches to read a given language using a determined methodology and preselected materials. What is most often forgotten is that the teacher teaches reading to the child. The importance of this was brought home to me about five years ago when visiting a school program for migrant children. A reading class was in progress and the teacher, with kind insistence, was trying to get a six year old child to read. Obviously, something was the matter. The child's eyes were glazed; his attention wandered. The teacher finally, mercifully, called on another student to read. I was intrigued by the unresponsiveness of the child and took the trouble to inquire further. He had neither breakfast that morning, nor supper the previous night. His last meal, in fact, had been the free school lunch of the previous day. With the child in that famished condition, it then seemed perfectly ridiculous to ask him to worry about such a secondary thing as learning to read. My point is that the child is a very basic consideration in the reading process.

It is perhaps in this area that the greatest developments will take place in reading in the next decade. The reasons are two: First, the great interest in Early Childhood Education around the country; and second, the work of Glenn Doman who wrote a book called How to Teach Your Baby to Read. Doman's thesis, if I may be allowed to phrase it in my own words, is that we have withheld reading from the child for too long. Just as the child's language ability is greatest in his earlier years, so he has an interest and an ability for reading that can be developed much earlier than has been done up to now. Doman even sets forth a technique for helping the parent initiate reading with the two year old child. This perhaps sounds exaggerated; it really is not. What has been done in current practice is to forget the child and his language development from birth to age five or six when he then entered school. All his previous experience and language ability were disregarded and formal school instruction began without, as it were, a foundation. This disregard of those early years is an obvious waste. For the bilingual child it is doubly so and early childhood is an area where much can and should be done. Schools should institute a program perhaps in conjunction with the parental involvement part of their bilingual program in order to supply know-how and materials for parents who, in turn, can expose the child to books, magazines and printed materials as early as possible.

Doman's book, of course, is directed to the parent. His field is that of physical therapy. He is not a language specialist or a reading specialist. His book, perhaps because of this, has received a less than lukewarm reception. However, thinking persons are beginning to be concerned with those early years. One of these is Ragnhild Söderbergh of

Sweden who followed Doman's procedures for teaching a child to read and arrived at the following conclusion: "I have shown how the child, as it learns more and more words, gradually breaks down these words into smaller units; first morphemes then graphemes. At last, the child arrives at an understanding of the correspondence between sound (phoneme) and letter (grapheme) and is able to read any new word through analysis and synthesis. In my experiment, this stage is reached after 14 months of reading. That is, when the child is three and one-half years old."[7] Söderbergh concludes "An important thing is that the children studied in the research work mentioned by Jeanne Chall are school children who start learning to read at the age of five and a half to seven. With Lenneberg, Chomsky, and others in mind, we may suggest that a child two to three years old, the age of extraordinary linguistic capacity, might profit more from a method which enables him to find out the system all by himself."[8] To those interested in Early Childhood, I would suggest a thorough reading of Söderbergh.

The second researcher is Christian who in an article entitled "Development of Skills in a Minority Language Before Age Three: A Case Study" closely agrees with the findings of Soderbergh after also having followed in general the procedures recommended by Doman. His case study is based on his observation of two of his children, Rachel and a brother, Aurelio.

From all the preceding, it would appear on the surface that we have been guilty of two cardinal sins in the past: Insistence on teaching English reading to the Spanish dominant bilingual while trying to make him forget his Spanish; and blanking out any sort of reading instruction for the child until he was formally exposed to reading in school.

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[7]Ragnhild Söderbergh, Two Studies in the Early Acquisition of Swedish as a First Language, Paper presented at the Conference on Child Languages, Chicago, Illinois, November, 1971, p. 1.

[8]Söderbergh, p. 32

Since we are discussing the child, a word needs to be said about his language. We have described the child whom we are discussing as a Spanish dominant bilingual. Further clarification is needed. It probably means that his mother tongue is Spanish and that he will know a certain amount of English. Further examination of this statement further reveals that his Spanish probably is of two types. Some words will be dialectal, others will be standard. The same can be said of his English. Hence, his language competence is best described by saying that he speaks Spanish and English and the respective dialects of the two languages with which he is in contact. When reading materials are presented to the child, the language which he will encounter will be standard, for the simple reason that materials in the dialect are practically non-existent. It appears to me that the important thing is that the child not be "put down" because of his language and that when it comes to reading the emphasis be on helping him decipher the written language rather than on "correct" versus "incorrect" language or on the respective values of language and dialect.

It is important that the language used in early texts be one which is as closely as possible within the experiential realm of the child. Thus, to a child from a rural area the sentence "The subway clattered through the tunnel" would be meaningless. By the same token, for the urban dweller, "The sandstorm killed the crops" is purely vicarious.

In discussing the child, we are faced with a necessity of saying a few words regarding the role of the family in reading. A child from a family where the father and mother read, where books and printed matter are readily available, will learn to read more quickly, and be at

ease with books. If the mother and father also interest themselves in reading stories to the children, point out sounds and words, and have the child look at pictures, the child will be motivated to read. The existence of siblings in the family enriches the child's oral language and also increases his opportunity to come in contact with the printed word via the books brought home by his older brothers and sisters. It is important to stress the role of the family in the very early years in the modeling of language, the telling of stories and the initiation to the printed page and to reading. A few years ago, a language recording project of the five year old bilingual in Texas was carried out by the Foreign Language Education Center at the University of Texas. One of the interesting sidelines was the discovery that many of the children did not know the fairy tales in English or Spanish. An acquaintance with the fairy tales plus a subsequent identification of the story in a book would be a powerful incentive to learn to read.

SCHOOL AND SOCIETY

School and society attitudes and customs naturally affect both the language and reading of the child. Manuel H. Guerra in "Why Juanito Doesn't Read" and Rosen and Ortego in Language and Reading Instruction of Spanish-speaking Children in the Southwest addressed themselves to these problems. The attitude toward the minority language in the home and in the school, the curriculum in the school, society's orientation of schools for the majority, etc., certainly affect reading. For persons interested in pursuing this further, I would suggest the above mentioned articles.

Serafina Krear in her paper "Development of Pre-Reading Skills in a Second Language or Dialect" pinpoints the assessment that has to be made: "A socio-linguistic perspective for teaching reading in bilingual programs begins with an assessment of the bilingual reality of the school community and the community wishes for attempting to maintain or change that reality through the bilingual program."[9]

THE MATERIALS TO BE USED

It is probably still justifiable to shed the tears of Jeremiah when it comes to the question of materials for teaching reading to the bilingual. However, the situation is improving as companies vie for the market and as research grants become available for developing these

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[9]Krear, p. 1.

materials. It is certainly elementary to say that they should have the usual physical quality of attractiveness, clearness and unbiased ethnic representations. The content should not be simply of the kind that says: Pedro corre. Corre Pedro. María corre. Corre María. Reading material should include stories of very high level interest. It is only this that will make the children want to learn to read. It probably should abound with stories of dragons and elf's, Caperucita Roja, La Cenicienta and Los Tres Osos. The mind of this child should be challenged and his fantasy excited.

A great diversity of materials should be available representing different methodologies, different levels of interest and different levels of difficulty. Experience charts have not been mentioned, but they are certainly an excellent and appropriate instrument in beginning reading instruction for the child.

AN ISSUE

For years, the literature in reading insisted on the teaching of learning to read in English and blanked out all previous language experience. Now that learning to read in the mother tongue before learning to read in the second language is being stressed, the question is often raised "Does instruction in reading Spanish affect the ability to read in English?" Maurice Kaufman in an experiment conducted in New York City came to the following conclusions: "1. There was some evidence of positive transfer of learning from instruction in reading Spanish to ability in English at School B. There was no reliable evidence of interference at either school. 2. Greater reading ability in Spanish resulted from direct instruction and in reading Spanish than from unplanned transfer from English alone."[10]

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[10]Kaufman, Maurice, p. 527.

That learning to read in the mother tongue increases the child's command of his mother tongue and has a positive transfer to the reading of English, that the good reader in Spanish is also a good reader of English is information that has to be continually conveyed to parents, educators, school boards and the community in general. Witness the following quote: "Unfortunately, the same teachers (the teachers of the poor) seem to lack the sophistication to understand why the new programs in bilingual education and non-standard English are accelerating the rate of reading failure in their pupils."[11] This quotation is taken from an article "What Will It Be? READING or Machismo and Soul?" by Edward D. Vail and published in Clearing House, October, 1970. The author talks about accountability, militants, the poor, bilingual education non-standard dialects, ethnic background, but never really relates the diverse elements. He fails to understand the basic premise of bilingual education. However, the significant thing is his negative attitude toward learning to read in the mother tongue and his ascribing to the previous failure of the bilingual child to learn reading to the present programs in bilingual education - programs which are just beginning to be developed.

CONCLUSIONS

At this point, some tentative conclusions are in order. 1) Encourage parents to begin teaching their children to read as early as possible. 2) Reading should be taught first in the mother tongue of the child, the language the child knows most. Once the "process" has been mastered,

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[11]Vail, p. 93

reading instruction in the second language can be started provided there is also a previous oral knowledge of the second langauge. 3) Always isolate the difficulties the child is having. Analyze them, and use a variety of methods in solving them. 4) As great a variety as possible of printed materials, books, cards, magazines, etc., should be available in the classroom. Bilingual programs through the parental involvement specialist should try to make them available to parents also. 5) Keep the interest of the child in reading as high as possible. 6) Provide content that will challenge the mind of the child and stir his fantasy. 7) Good readers will be good readers in both language systems - Spanish and English. If not, the problem is language. 8) Encourage as much individual reading as possible whether it be in Spanish or in English.

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RECIPE FOR A BILINGUAL TEACHER

Select a sympathetic personality. Trim off all prejudices, superiority complexes, intolerance and haughtiness. Pour over it in generous portions a mixture of the wisdom of Solomon, the knowledge of Socrates, the courage of Daniel, the strength of Samson, the craftiness of Delilah and the patience of Job. Add a sizeable amount of the knowledge of two languages and an understanding of two cultures. Season with the salt of experience, the pepper of animation, the oil of sympathy, a dash of humor and a cup of the good wine of empathy. Stew for about four years in non-air-conditioned portable classrooms, testing occasionally with the fork of sharp criticism thrust in by a principal, superintendent or bilingual program coordinator. When thoroughly done, garnish with a meager salary and serve hot to the community.

Joseph Michel
October 1971